

## BERTHA AND KARL LEUBSDORF GALLERY

132 East 68th Street New York, NY 10065

### Easy Listening

By Alan Licht on William Anastasi

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IN THE ANNALS of visual artists employing sound, William Anastasi occupies a curious position. Audio is integral to much of his output, yet he's never made music as an extension of his visual art practice à la Yves Klein or Jean Dubuffet, and the sounds he favors are certainly more straightforward than those preferred by many practitioners of "sound art". They are not hidden or latent, nor are they fabricated with the intent to map the dimensions of a given space in acoustic terms; instead, Anastasi's aural components are simple, even banal field recordings, easily recognizable as everyday noises generated by everyday objects. But, crucially, Anastasi presents the sounds' physical sources along with his recordings, putting the muted object and its auditory identity back on equal footing. By displaying such objects in the gallery, Anastasi is engaging the same legacy of the readymade that has been so influential to Minimal and Conceptual art. And by juxtaposing a tape recording of sounds made by a thing with the thing itself, he introduces a complex new temporality, reanimating and further mediating the objects, and collapsing past, present, and future tense into one audiovisual event.

A recent exhibition at Hunter College's Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery, "William Anastasi: Sound Works, 1963-2013," curated by Maxim Weintraub, was the first such survey since "Sound Objects" at the Dwan Gallery in New York in 1966. Many of the titular works from the earlier show made a reappearance. *Sound Object (Radiator)*, 1964/2013, is a relocated radiator with a recording of its previous operation playing through two speakers fastened to it, and there were similar presentations of various other quotidian objects, for example *Sound Object (Fan)*, 1964/2013, and *Sound Object (Pneumatic Drill)*, 1964/2013, both presumably operative but powered off. The



William Anastasi, *Sound Object (Radiator)* 1964/2013, radiator, speakers, sound, dimensions variable

latter two were displayed in a gallery window visible from the street, with the recordings playing through speakers placed outside, rather than through those Anastasi had mounted on the objects themselves. The piece's sounds, which mingled with street noise, were thus twice removed from their sources. In *Sound Object (Deflated Tire)*, 1964/2010, Anastasi inverts the idea of Robert Morris's *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, 1961, by rapping the process of disabling an entity—deflating a tire—rather than that of constructing it.

The rest of the show was devoted to drawings, several also accompanied by the recordings of their creation. The sounds of squeaky, short pencil scrapes are audible as one views the densely tangled lines of *One Hour with Graphite*, 2013, while more protracted, flowing swishes are presented as the auditory properties of the straight strokes of *Without Title (timed/unsighted, in situ drawing remembering the sound of its own making)*, 2013. These recordings, like those incorporated into the sound objects, introduce a temporal element,

but here they are remnants of a finite process. The drawing and its sound are begun and finished at the same time, and they are initiated solely by Anastasi, rather than sourced from found materials. Anastasi has also produced drawings while listening to music: The 1963 series “Constellation Drawings” was executed while the artist played a recording of Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*, allowing the duration of the music to determine that of the drawing process itself. His method, which consisted of closing his eyes and deliberately marking a piece of paper without following the rhythm of the music, echoes John Cage and Merce Cunningham’s asynchronous approach to music and dance. (Anastasi met Cage shortly before the Dwan show and became closer to the composer in 1977, after a collaborative performance at the Clocktower Gallery in TriBeCa led to daily chess games that continued for a number of years.) Visually, the “Constellation Drawings” echo the “blind drawings” Anastasi makes while riding the subway or walking, which are characterized by Twombly-like squiggles and scribbles guided by aleatory neural reflexes. Such works suggest that notation is not only optical but corporeal. The tape of an audio recorder is, of course also “blind” in that it captures only the audio of a concert or performance, while the act of recording, in turn, could be likened to drawing, since sounds are physically inscribed on the tape.

Such densely interwoven connections are even more apparent in Anastasi’s witty work with playback machinery itself, such as *Microphone*, 1963, in which a reel-to-reel recorder plays back a tape Anastasi made of the same machine running thereby doubling the live sound with a recorded one, and *The World’s Greatest Music*, 1977, which recalls Cage’s use of variable-speed turntables in *Imaginary Landscapes No. 1* (1939). Here, Anastasi places three dusty 78-rpm albums of Mozart, Wagner, and Brahms on portable children’s record players with the needle in the runoff groove, each starting and stopping at varying times. The hiss of the needle stuck in the scratchy groove recalls not only the loping chug of the tape-recorder reels but the whoosh of the deflating tire, just as the clanking of the radiator has a rhythmic resemblance to the strokes of a pencil. Not only has Anastasi radically expanded the implications of the readymade via his holistic take on objecthood, but he has also managed to connect the activities of his own artistic practice through the literal reverberations of their shared sonic traits.

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